

DISMANTLING GENDER STEREOTYPES
GOOD PRACTICE AND STRATEGIC LESSONS FROM EQUAL

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*This document has been prepared as part of a series of papers on **Strategic Lessons from the Equal Opportunities Strand of EQUAL**. The main purpose of these papers is to underpin and help to focus **transnational cooperation within the framework of the European Social Fund (ESF)**, as a means of promoting EQUAL principles and of mainstreaming EQUAL approaches that can be directly related to the new ESF priorities for action.*

These Strategic Lessons seek to highlight, from a European perspective, what has already been achieved by EQUAL in relation to the new ESF thematic priorities and to demonstrate those EQUAL approaches that have a potential for wider transfer within the Union. They could thus be helpful to those who are running, or are planning to set up, transnational networks in one of the thematic priority fields of the ESF.

This document summarises outcomes from EQUAL Development Partnerships (DPs), transnational and national thematic networks that have been concerned with changing attitudes in order to dismantle gender stereotypes. This document includes annotated references to the EU policy context and also relevant background material from EQUAL's experience that can be accessed on-line through hyperlinks.

1. THE BACKGROUND

Some 62 % of all households in the European Union are 'dual earner' and thus this has become the most dominant form of women's and men's life arrangements. Yet, despite increasing female participation in the labour market, the private lives of many couples are still showing the role pattern of the 'male breadwinner' model. Men are perceived as providers for the family, whilst women are expected to shoulder the lion's share of unpaid work at home. To manage everyday life they tend to become 'super women,' striving to reconcile gainful employment and career ambitions with homemaking, social life, motherhood and marriage or partnership. Time use surveys comparing the number of hours spent by women and men on activities related to work, family duties and leisure reveal that this traditional pattern is difficult to change.

On average, in all EU Member States, if the total time of gainful employment and domestic tasks is considered, women's work day is longer than men's¹. Gender gaps in the use of time are widened when there are young children in the household. Compared to women without children, mothers living in a couple spend on average at least one hour less per day on paid jobs. At the same time, those mothers devote daily between 5½ and 7½ hours to parental and domestic tasks. For men living in a couple, the tendency is the same as for women. Their time spent on family duties increases with the arrival of children but unlike women, their time in gainful employment rises or remains stable, when they become fathers.

The European Commission's response to this situation is outlined in its '[Roadmap for equality between women and men](#)' that states "*It (the Commission) engages in dialogue with stakeholders and the media, supports awareness-raising actions and promotes men's role in reconciliation policies, including by encouraging fathers to take parental leave and assume more responsibility in managing the household.*"

¹ With the exception of Denmark, Finland, Sweden and the UK where it is almost equivalent

The European Commission also supports actions and projects that aim at improving career guidance for both women and men interested in pursuing non-traditional careers. It also funds initiatives, including through the European Social Fund (ESF), to improve women's level of qualifications, particularly in the scientific and technical fields and in new technologies, and to prepare women for better access to management posts in the public and private sectors. In addition as far as the ESF is concerned, Article 3 of the [Regulation \(EC\) No 1081/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council](#) of 5 July 2006 commits the it to *“mainstreaming and specific action to improve access to employment, increase the sustainable participation and progress of women in employment and reduce gender based segregation in the labour market, including by addressing the root causes, direct and indirect, of gender pay gaps.”* Whilst, Article 6 on 'Gender equality and equal opportunities' states that *“The Member States shall ensure that (ESF) operational programmes include a description of how gender equality and equal opportunities are promoted in the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of operational programmes. Member States shall promote a balanced participation of women and men in the management and implementation of operational programmes at local, regional and national level, as appropriate.”*

1.1. THE CONTRIBUTION OF EQUAL

The 'Roadmap for equality between women and men' points out that *“The European Commission has, over the years, been promoting a number of measures to fight gender stereotypes, including through educational and cultural programmes and sport.”* In the same section, the Roadmap also indicates that *“The media have a crucial role to play in combating gender stereotypes. They can contribute to presenting a realistic picture of the skills and potential of women and men in modern society and avoid portraying them in a degrading and offensive manner.”*

These two statements were closely reflected in the EQUAL Community Initiative, which had one strand dedicated to 'EQUAL Opportunities' and one of the two thematic fields of this strand was 'Reconciling family and professional life.' A total of 188 projects, or Development Partnerships (DPs) as they were called, were selected to work on this theme. Whilst in the first EQUAL selection Round in 2002, working on attitudinal changes was the single focus of only a few of these DPs, in second Round it became a transversal activity in many projects. Some DPs developed integrated approaches, involving educational schemes, television programmes and media to address the needs of their target groups. In others, media and publicity campaigns to change gender stereotypes were an active ingredient of their work programmes. For example, they were used in the newer Member States, as follows:

- In Malta, television programmes were the main vehicle to promote gender equality;
- In Latvia, as part of a mix of activities to link labour market measures and strategies to address human rights issues;
- In Poland, to increase the visibility of 'women friendly' enterprises and to encourage others to follow suit;
- In Slovakia, to create the right climate in the business world and in the public-at-large.

In the course of EQUAL, over 50 DPs focused on raising awareness, changing attitudes and working with media. This represents a considerable body of experience and the activities of a number of these DPs are portrayed in this document, as examples of practices that have the potential for replication.

In addition, at national level, almost all Member States established National Thematic Networks (NTNs) to make optimal use of new work-life-balance approaches generated by these EQUAL DPs. While working on the theme of 'Reconciliation of working and family life' NTN, such as those in [France and Ireland](#), mounted a range of different actions. In general, the NTNs saw the priorities as establishing a more balanced role and task sharing of fathers and men at home and more focused strategies to make businesses, particularly SMEs, and trade unions understand that reconciliation is not a private problem for women, but one that concerns them as well.

At transnational level, DPs also worked together learning from each other and combining their experiences to develop new tools for, and approaches to, better reconciliation. Just one example is FLEX@ction Transnational Partnership in which German, Spanish and Dutch DPs cooperated produce a Good Practice Guide on:

- Awareness raising campaigns on role models and role sharing in the family;
- Action plans in companies to promote new forms of work organisation to support reconciliation;
- Diversification of the employment services from reconciliation and work-life balance perspectives;
- Creation of new companies of family support services and adaptation of opening hours of public services.

In general, these exchanges and transfers of experience reinforced the position and status of the DPs, within their respective local, regional or national contexts.

At European level, a Thematic Group (ETG 4) was established early in EQUAL's life time to create and promote a 'European Model of Comprehensive Approaches to Equal Opportunities.' This is now one of the main legacies of EQUAL and it contains a section on '[Improving the Work-Life-Balance of Women and Men](#),' which provides useful information on approaches to 'Turning work-life-balance schemes into a process of cultural change' and 'Learning new and un-learning old gender roles.' Finally, one of the very last EQUAL European events was a Gender Mainstreaming Peer Review which was hosted by Flanders, in Leuven, during February 2008. This was one in a series of reviews established by a Community of Practice (CoP) on Gender Mainstreaming that, in turn, had been created as an EQUAL European Mainstreaming Platform. During the peer review, media professionals, ESF managers and members of ESF Technical Support Structures from ten EU Member States went through a viewing session of the various elements of the Flemish campaign called 'women and men united – perfect in balance.' The guests were then invited to assess the achievements of '[MV United](#)' and encouraged to develop or support similar activities in the 2007 to 2013 ESF Programming Period.

2. SOME NEW SOLUTIONS: GOOD PRACTICE FROM EQUAL

As has already been indicated EQUAL Development Partnerships (DPs) contributed to promoting equality in unpaid care and family work. Their strategies and concepts triggered changes in roles and task sharing between women and men from the current generation of parents. Some DPs also worked with young adults and children to challenge stereotypes during the crucial stages when gender roles are being formed. Whilst many of the approaches targeted men in the first instance, a substantial number also aimed to displace both those 'breadwinner' and 'super woman' models. A great variety of actions were tested and carefully monitored, and the most successful of these are outlined below.

2.1. STRATEGY N° 1: REACHING THE PUBLIC AT LARGE THROUGH MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

The Dutch Experience

In terms of measurable changes, the most significant EQUAL media campaign was implemented in the Netherlands. It was shaped like a marketing strategy for a new commercial product. Such a strategy takes account of the specific life styles and characteristics of a given target group, and is designed to build a critical mass of people that, after having received the marketing message, would adopt the new product. That critical mass then triggers an on-going process of multiplication, similar to a nuclear chain reaction, and eventually creates sustainable change. Led by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Dutch campaign with slogan of '[Men Taking the Lead](#)' worked successfully along those lines.

The DP's message was simple: if more men were prepared to become more involved with tasks at home, more women would be able to enter the labour market and to reconcile their working and family lives in a more satisfying way. Unlike the past campaigns, when responsible Ministers or gender equality bodies tended to 'preach' politically correct attitudes, the DP used a sophisticated mix of activities to initiate 'discussions at people's kitchen tables,' as the first decisive step towards change.

These discussions were stimulated by a bombardment of commercials on TV and on radio, supported by a number of other PR activities such as press conferences, a website, a series of talk shows and countless events throughout the country. The first message confronted men with the excuses that they tended to make up in order to avoid taking on more responsibilities at home. After a while, the strategy was fine-tuned and concentrated more on motivation and inspiration rather than on provocation. This second wave of messages also addressed the need for women to learn to let go of their 'household and care monopoly' and of their strong beliefs about how things should be done. It also focused on the fact that most employers, male colleagues and friends do not react enthusiastically if a man undertakes more family work. Over a period of 16 months, the campaign encouraged men to start a dialogue on the equal division of family tasks with their employers and also with their friends and peers at work. With the project's assistance, this resulted in many men making 'role sharing agreements' with their partners and/or employers.

To multiply its message even further, the DP convinced other organisations to join forces. Together with large companies, NGOs and with the country's top football team, the project organised activities to let fathers experience the fun and satisfaction they can be gained when spending quality time with their kids and the difference that this time spent together can make to the lives of their children and partners. The impact of the DP's efforts was monitored in great detail and is quite impressive:

- Three months after its launch, the campaign was known to 55% of the Dutch population;
- During the same period a change of attitude was recorded with regard to the statement "*if young children are part of the family, a mother should not have a job.*" Whilst in January 2003, 40% of the less-educated respondents agreed with that statement, only 25% did so in April of the same year. Amongst the highly educated 38% "*agreed totally*" in January as compared to only 30% in April 2003.
- According to the final analysis, 59% of the men and 52% of the women reported to be discussing the division of family tasks at least once a month. Agreements on sharing those tasks are mentioned as the most frequent result. Between April 2003 and May 2004 the number of men having negotiated task sharing agreements rose from 67% to 88%, whilst the percentage among women remained stable at 72%.

The Flemish Experience

Transnational cooperation and European thematic work enabled the transfer of these Dutch good practices to DPs in other Member States, particular in Belgium Flanders which launched [MV United](#) or 'women and men united – perfect in balance,' during the second round of EQUAL.

The "flagship" of the campaign was a [telenovela](#) entitled Emma. This Cinderella-like story took the audience from an orphaned young woman trying to find her first job all the way along her steeply rising career that led to a top position in television. The story also included her search for the murderer of her father and was linked with at least two other sub-plots. These were the life of Emma's friend, an immigrant woman, who was also trying to make it in the media and was caught between two cultures and the fight between an older talk show host and a young 'shooting' star, who takes her place.

The special thing about Emma was that her creators turned the television series into what they called a '[transmedial experience](#).' This involved the provision of downloads of the 103 episodes

for use on mobile play stations and this was particularly appreciated by young people. In addition, 36 websites rolled out 'Emma worlds' in which fans of the telenovela could identify even more closely with its characters. For months, a group of scriptwriters produced an Emma blog and blogs for all the other leading characters, which enabled interactive contact between enchanted fans and these fictional individuals. Some 15 [Internet games](#) also played a part in the chase and provided clues to catch the murderer. Real world additions to the Emma websites included 'contact ads' and graffiti spread all over Flemish towns, which reinforced the Internet surfers' feelings of being part of this brave new world.

Other project activities included:

- The [Grote Oversteek](#) "(The Big Switch) a documentary that featured men and women as they moved from one village to another to create two communities - one completely female and one completely male. This switch made people change gender roles since every mono-sex couple had to cope with what was usually managed by a mixed couple. The weeklong social experiment carried out by VRT was complimented by a radio programme that deepened the discussions about the new experiences in the two villages;
- [Daughters of Venus](#), a series of documentaries that showed women who had made non-traditional occupational choices that was produced by [Vitaya](#), a commercial lifestyle channel;
- [180](#) – A melodrama about a single mother who was trying to get her life back on track after years of unemployment. This mini-series targeted, via regional television, an audience that was traditionally hard to reach and sought to strengthen inter-agency approaches involving employment offices, counselling and training centres and education providers;
- Two special editions of [TeamTime](#), a [lifestyle magazine](#) produced for a broad public, that focused on work-life-balance for women and men;
- A play, the production of which was combined with [training for a group of young immigrants](#). The idea was three-fold. The play conveyed the message of respecting and valuing diversity, whilst the training was intended to support young women and men from different ethnic communities in heading towards a career as actors. Last but not least, the project was designed to stimulate theatres, television channels and film producers to commit to diversity by hiring the young actors;
- A [qualitative study](#) entitled '[CASANOVA](#) – The New House(hold)' on role and task sharing between women and men that was based on the outcomes from focus groups of young immigrants, young people and "new" fathers.

In addition, booklets, brochures and flyers were produced and disseminated in large numbers to individuals and a wide range of organisations. These publications offered support and practical tips to dual career couples on how to balance gainful employment and family responsibilities and to women immigrants who faced decisions about whether they should seek employment outside the home. Another brochure encouraged immigrant women and men to embark on continuing education and the 'He/she-does-that-calendar' that was a planning tool to help family members share the unpaid work at home.

2.2. STRATEGY N° 2: LEARNING NEW GENDER ROLES AND UN-LEARNING OLD ONES

Practical training in, and exposure to, new roles and tasks proved to be particularly successful when taking account of the specific cultural context. In France, where kindergartens or schools are rarely meeting points for parents, new neighbourhood centres were well received by both women and men. Users appreciated the idea of transferring the discussion on task sharing away

from their homes to a neutral space. Thanks to EQUAL, DPs working in several regions, provided opportunities for men and women to meet and talk shop with, or without, the support of professionals.

The French Experience

L' Ecole des parents (School for Parents), located in Paris, organised workshops through which parents learned about practical solutions to task sharing between mothers and fathers. In the beginning mothers were more numerous, but over time the number of fathers attending the workshops grew significantly. Male participants claimed that learning from peers who were more advanced in trying out new gender roles helped them to seriously consider similar moves, for instance by taking parental leave.

In other cities 'parents' cafés' invited men and women to give voice to what they felt or thought about old and new gender roles. Parents were also encouraged to meet with, or without, their children and to embark on practical activities which involved role changes. Men and women discovered that they possessed skills that were often labelled as typical of the other gender, such as cooking, constructing technical toys, playing football, telling stories, making music or singing lullabies, and that they enjoyed using them.

The Italian Experience

Italian DPs based their strategies for attitudinal changes on the assumption that men liked to plan and implement projects over a certain period of time, as opposed to being permanently 'condemned' to household or care tasks. Thus, project work was used to pave the way to an improved and lasting male involvement in family duties.

Laboratorio del Tempo, the City of Prato DP, took men on a journey of change and supported them in reaching a concrete goal: for instance completing a course in neo-natal care, dedicating Saturday mornings to spend quality time with their kids or preparing a meal for the family once a week, including shopping and cleaning up the kitchen afterwards.

Through '[men only](#)' courses other Italian DPs helped men to assess and improve their skills in household management. The programmes provided learning by doing domestic jobs such as ironing, cooking, washing or cleaning a house. At the same time, they said that they had become more aware of both the value and the burden of unpaid family work.

2.3. STRATEGY N° 3: CHANGE SCHOOL CURRICULA AND METHODOLOGIES

Through working with young adults and children, EQUAL DPs addressed not only role sharing and vocational choices in future generations, but also the prevailing attitudinal patterns of the current generation of parents.

Training and continuing educational activities developed by DPs enabled kindergarten and primary school teachers to help boys and girls explore existing gender differences and to dismantle stereotyped perceptions of men and women. For instance, role patterns discovered in the kindergarten groups were linked to an analysis of the different tasks performed by mothers and fathers in the home. Role play and discussions triggered questions about the causes of inequality and perceptions about how the children envisaged their own adult lives. Almost inevitably, this process stimulated further discussions in the families of the children involved. Supported by awareness raising and training events, parents became more open to the idea of reviewing their own performance as role models and to consider changes. Didactic material and tools prepared by the projects helped to disseminate the approach.

In Barcelona, [Tempora](#) created innovative curricula for primary and secondary schools, which challenged traditional gender roles and also the subtle integration of the related stereotypes into science and technology. Rather than offering extra general courses on equal opportunities, these

schemes used household processes such as cooking, baking or ironing to explain certain phenomena in chemistry and physics. The project succeeded, as youngsters, and particularly boys began to realise the value of unpaid female work and to accept more responsibilities at home. The scheme created a lot of media attention and a heated and fruitful discussion amongst teachers and parents, which subsequently led the competent authorities to generalise the approach.

In the Netherlands, a [DP](#) built on research that indicated that young men who were at the beginning of their careers had a more egalitarian vision than the previous generation when it came to sharing care responsibilities with their wives or partners. For instance, to be more proactive fathers, 40 % of Dutch engineers wanted to work fewer hours, but, due to various barriers, had not been able to fulfil this wish. Through an [Internet tool](#), the DP encouraged men to make those barriers visible and it also proposed practical solutions to overcoming these obstacles. In addition, the DP addressed parenthood and gender roles in secondary and tertiary education - at an age when career paths are being formed. Some young engineers who were actually combining work and care were trained as ['ambassadors'](#) for a new male role model. They acted as visiting lecturers and passed on their experience to the students. The DP produced teaching materials and tools, including a training module as part of technical education programmes at universities, which are now in demand in a growing number of educational institutions.

3. SOME CONCLUSIONS FOR ESF OP DESIGNERS AND IMPLEMENTERS

Building and capitalising on validated good practice from EQUAL can help to change attitudes and perceptions related to male and female roles and task sharing between women and men. There are some encouraging trends, which indicate that the scales may be tipping towards a more even distribution of care and domestic work. Qualitative research² points to a growing number of men who are keen to live up to their responsibilities as fathers. However, further progress will require long-term cooperative strategies and relentless persistence.

There is a need to establish awareness raising campaigns over a longer period of time, as an integral part of publicly subsidised programmes aimed at gender equality in the labour market and in society, in general. While, the considerable resources that have been allocated to the ESF can be used to apply the lessons from EQUAL, such campaigns are unlikely to be implemented successfully by organisations acting on their own. Thus ESF Managing Authorities could extend the [partnership principle](#) used in EQUAL to create, or to participate in, national or regional consortia of education and training agencies, equality bodies and media interests that would explore how the EQUAL good practices, materials and tools could be used to build a long-term campaign and to push for change.

Transnational cooperation could speed up this process by providing structured opportunities for mutual learning involving those who are responsible for the implementation of ESF operational programmes and other strategic stakeholders such as those outlined in the paragraph above. Thus, if an ESF Learning Network on Equal Opportunities or a Community of Practice on Gender Mainstreaming is established and funded in 2010, it is suggested that 'Attitudinal changes to dismantle gender stereotypes' should be a key topic for transnational exchange and development.

² For instance: ² Margret Fine-Davis et al. : Fathers and mothers – Dilemmas of the Work-Life-Balance, Dublin, 2002